

Transforming Words into Action: Service Learning as a Teaching Strategy

by Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A.

Author of *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*

When the current concept of service learning was emerging in the mid-1980s, I was editor of the only national newsletter to promote this idea in schools across the United States. While contemplating ideas for articles I had a sudden thought: *Books with Heart*, books that would inspire and engage readers to care and then to act in ways that benefit others. Little did I know that my first list of a dozen or so books would illuminate my thinking about service learning to add an essential component: Literature. Today, as in those early days, literature—fiction and nonfiction—can be of extreme value as students explore complex concepts in their immediate vicinity and in distant places. Added to this are news stories, journals, blogs—all forms of adding to our knowledge and replacing assumptions with accurate information.

What is service learning?

Simply put, service learning offers a reliable process for applying accumulated knowledge and skills to meet authenticated community needs. During the process, students continually add to what they know, confirm or reconsider attitudes and belief, and become more aware of their own place in the world. This can be applied to both a classroom academic experience and to independent or group student led approaches to learning and service.

The possibilities are extensive, all aimed at students meeting and likely exceeding learning standards and benchmarks through deeper purposeful involvement. Students grow a garden in science class that provides produce for a food bank or family shelter. While studying about World War II, students interview veterans of a past or current war to gain a deeper understanding of the particularities that affect men and women who serve, and use these stories to create a publication or performance to share what they learned with others. Students might take on an environmental issue, like the preponderance of single-use plastic water bottles that fill up dumpsters everywhere; they can apply persuasive writing abilities to develop a convincing marketing campaign for reusable water bottles and create PSAs to broadcast on local radio. For each of these examples, regardless of the subject or initiative that seeded the learning and the service, literature—fiction and nonfiction—can be a stimulus and connection to the minds and hearts of young people. Sample book titles are provided throughout this article, with a “top ten” list to come.

Service Learning always has:

- Academic relevance, rigor, and application
- Social analysis and high-level thinking
- Youth initiative, voice and choice
- Aspects of social and emotional integration
- Inquiry
- Purpose and process
- Emphasis of intrinsic over extrinsic
- Career ideas
- Global connections
- Literature integration
- Reflection

Books—fiction and nonfiction and even outstanding picture books read aloud to high school students—can be integrated into most any subject. A high school science class can read *Empty* by Suzanne Weyn, a science rich novel to show the perils that could occur when we deplete natural resources. Science and civics come to life with *Eyes Wide Open: Going Behind the Environmental Headlines* by Paul Fleischman as students examine current events with an eye to history, economics, psychology and sociology. In English and humanities classes, books, stories, and poetry can spark ideas that move words on the page to action within the community. For example, take the high school English teacher I encountered who was reluctant to adopt service learning as a teaching method. During a professional development session at his school, I referenced a book his class was reading, *Fahrenheit 451*, for a discussion about how books can be a catalyst for service learning. He was inspired enough to replicate this activity with his classes. He had his students conceptualize the key theme; they chose *censorship*. His students considered ways censorship was present in their community, and decided that children who did not have books in their homes due to poverty were experiencing a form of censorship. He encouraged them to construct an action plan, and they launched a book collection and partnership with local Boys and Girls Clubs to establish “taking libraries.” The result: the teacher said he received the most compelling and well-written essays from this unit than of any he had

received in his 18-year career. During a student-led group project related to child soldiers, the introduction of the book *War Brothers*, a graphic novel set in Uganda, based in part on interviews with rescued children, inspired students to stage a reading and art display that provoked discussion and participation with a wider audience than initially expected.

The Service Learning Bookshelf

Today service learning is considered a highly regarded and research-based approach to teaching and youth initiative. Integrating well-selected fiction and nonfiction titles can:

- describe the service experiences accomplished by others
- introduce important social themes
- tell stories from history
- model diverse ways of telling a story
- promote critical thinking and discussion
- prepare students to interact with diverse populations
- enhance the experiences students have in the community
- inspire students to serve

In my book *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*, thirteen chapters on various themes relevant in most communities such as hunger and poverty, environment and immigrants, each has an annotated “bookshelf,” so users can easily find recommended titles to advance depth of understanding. Well-written books such as those listed in the bookshelves provide tap into students’ curiosity and desire to know. They can give students the information they need to move to the next level of competency or inspire them to consider important topics.

I find television very educational. The minute someone turns it on, I go to the library and read a book.
Groucho Marks, actor

Authors model how to write, how to think creatively, and how to tell one’s own story. When the story conveys a concern shared by the students, a range of possibilities for their own actions can emerge.

Reading is clearly the foundation of learning. However, books can only go so far. In our classrooms, we want books that inspire students to action, books that provide knowledge and engagement and that stimulate *intrinsic motivation* for service. These bookshelves hold a myriad of titles that belong in the hands of students and that are resources for

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.
Joseph Addison, poet

teachers, program staff, or family members who want to introduce a topic, expand knowledge, or develop an inquiring mind.

Service learning is taught in many teacher-preparation programs as a must-include pedagogy. Through its impact on students and teachers, service learning has proven it deserves its rightful place in our classrooms. Once experienced within the academic context, particular when the process is made transparent for students, they can readily apply *The Five Stages of Service Learning* to their own causes and concerns.

The Five Stages of Service Learning

The process of service learning can best be understood through the Five Stages.

All service learning begins with **Investigation**: 1) investigation of student resources, called a “Personal Inventory” or profile, and 2) investigation of the community need. For the personal investigation, students’ conduct interviews in pairs to identify and consolidate an inventory of each person’s interests, skills, talents and areas for growth. Students can also consider a time they have helped others and a time they have been helped; this introduces the essential element of *reciprocity*. This list is then

The process of **personal inventory** or **profile** can be valuable in a group project, as students become aware of their collective skills, interests, talents and areas that each person would most like to develop or grow.

referenced, and developed while going through all service learning stages. Next, young people identify a topic or compelling issue of interest and authenticate a community need often through *action research* that includes use of media, interviews of experts, surveys of varied populations, and direct observation and personal experiences. Students then document the extent and nature of the problem and establish a baseline for monitoring progress.

Preparation occurs as students continue to acquire content knowledge as they deepen understanding, identify partners, organize a plan of action with clarified roles and responsibilities, build timelines, and continue developing skills. When done in a classroom context, teachers make certain their curricular intentions are met and essential questions explored. Students are typically more engaged by having a purpose, a need they authenticated during *investigation*. Integrating students' interests, skills, and talents keep them motivated as they learn more about the topic interwoven with class content. As this occurs, teachers and students note what skills need to be acquired or improved to have greater efficacy. Students continue to gain awareness of the topic. Through active learning and critical thinking, students understand the underlying problem and related subject matter. Analysis, creativity, and practicality lead to plans for action. When students are applying service learning as an individual who has identified a community need or within a group project, preparation remains essential for students to be well prepared for action; they continue to delve into the topic and gain a clearer perspective for what they can do, often with community partners. A plan of action is developed.

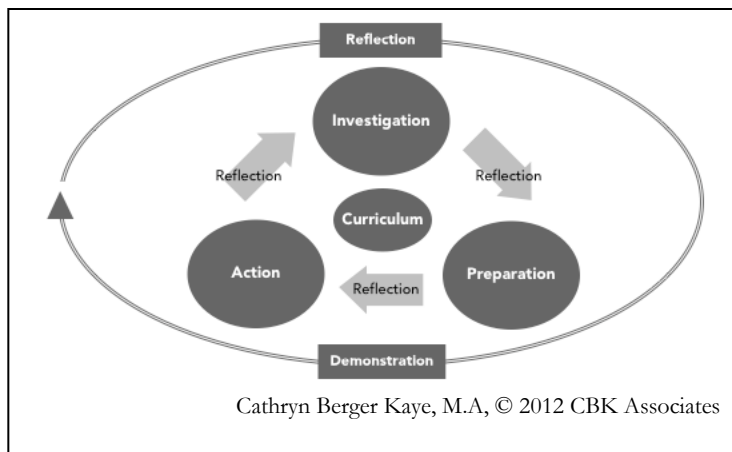
Action is the direct result of preparation. Students carry out their plan, applying what they have learned by taking action to benefit people, animals or the environment. Always, this action has value, purpose, and meaning as students continue to acquire academic skills and knowledge through thoughtful observations. Students think on their feet, observe what works and what requires modification, and may even become aware of an additional need to be addressed moving forward. The action stage may expose a skill that is lacking, and students eagerly work to learn what is needed to be more effective in their community action, all toward gaining a clearer perspective on the concept of *community*. During action, students continue to raise questions about the societal and ethical context of their efforts. Action can be direct service, indirect service, advocacy, or research, or a combination. Through action, students aim to meet the authenticated need. By taking action, young people identify themselves as community members and stakeholders and apply what is inherently theirs: ideas, energy, talents, skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, and concern for others and their natural surroundings as they contribute to the common good. Action can also be looked at through a developmental progression, as student learning causes them to change their own behaviors, and then instigate changes within their school and the broader community. Considering how the issues and actions have global impact or connect to similar causes in other places in the world leads to international mindedness.

Reflection, a vital and ongoing process throughout all the stages, integrates learning, personal growth and awareness. Using reflection, students consider how the experience, knowledge, and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and communities. The academic program is often so jam-packed that it's easy to miss the meaning behind the details or within the experience. Reflection is a pause button allowing students time to explore the impact of what they are learning and its effect on their thoughts and future actions. By reflecting, students put cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of experience into the larger context of self, the community, and the world. This helps them assess their skills, develop respect for others, and understand the impact of their actions on all involved including themselves. They can also consider what they would change or improve about a particular activity. The modality needs to vary to achieve depth and can emphasize different multiple intelligences through writing, photography, speaking, art, poetry, and movement, to name a few. After participating in guided opportunities for reflection, students can devise their own strategies for reflection and can lead each other through the reflective process. Students are more likely to respond positively to reflection when they choose the method and process of reflection, and identify the significant moments that call them to reflection.

Four basic elements of **reflection** can provide a helpful frame to explore both cognition and affect:

- What happened?
- How do I feel?
- Ideas?
- Questions?

Demonstration allows students to make explicit what and how they have learned and what they have accomplished through their community involvement. They exhibit their expertise through public presentations—displays, performances, letters to the editor, photo displays, podcasts, class lessons—that draw on the investigation, preparation, action, and reflection stages of their experience. Presenting what they have learned allows students to teach others while also identifying and acknowledging for themselves a critical aspect of metacognitive development. Students take charge of their learning as they synthesize and integrate the process through demonstration. Always the emphasis should remain on the intrinsic benefits of learning and the satisfaction of helping to meet community needs. Through demonstration, student accomplishment is publically recognized and confirms that school and community members understand, appreciate, and value students’ contributions. Keep in mind that demonstration is ongoing as students document their entire service learning process so they have a comprehensive story to tell about their *learning* and their *service*.



Authors and Ten Must-Have Books

Back in my early days of connecting service learning and literature, I had a nagging question: What inspires authors to write these books? I wanted to find out. Over the years I have interviewed 40 authors about why they wrote their books and how they approach the writing process. They also shared stories from their readers about social action that occurred *because* of their book. Eileen Spinelli, author of many delightful picture books including *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch*, told me, “A businessman in New York read *Mr. Hatch* and began to send flowers anonymously to his employees. . . . One teacher told me that on Valentine’s Day she placed a bag of candy at the door of a neighbor who had been giving her a hard time. She told the kids, and they made Valentines for classmates they were having a hard time with. I have heard of kids taking brownies and lemonade to the fire department; others have visited nursing homes.” Author Francisco Jiménez, who has written several memoirs about his experiences growing up as a migrant farm worker in central California such as *The Circuit*, *Breaking Through*, *Reaching Out*, and the picture book, *La Mariposa*, told me, “When growing up, there was hardly any material in school I could relate to regarding my cultural background. In my writing, I hope to contribute to a body of American literature that many children can relate to, especially those from similar backgrounds as mine.” Eve Bunting, James Howe, Jerry Spinelli, Janet Tashjian, Jordan Sonnenblick, Pat Brisson, among others, shared their reasons for writing, and more. Tony Johnston, author of the *Any Small Goodness* and *Bone by Bone by Bone*, described writing ideas for her books on sticky notes while on morning walks. She checked into a motel for a week, spread the notes on the floor, and wrote two novels using this method. Deborah Ellis revealed how she travels and lives in different parts of the world to research her stories, both fiction and nonfiction. This method has led to her outstanding collection of books, including *No Safe Place*, *Off to War*, *I Am a Taxi*, and *Jakeman*. These interviews are included with my book *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*.

Now, my impossible top ten books list. Impossible, because my mind wants to say, “Oh, one more, and this one, too!” Here are my top ten for today. Tomorrow may be a different story.

What do each of the titles have in common? Each is a call to action. Each inspires us to recognize we can participate in being part of the solution. In these pages are vivid stories and examples of people stepping out of their comfort zones to disrupt the status quo and enter a world of possibilities.

After Gandhi: One Hundred Years of Nonviolent Resistance by Anne Ibley O’Brien and Perry Edmond. From 1908 to 2003, key moments of activism are presented through the tireless work of courageous individuals. Nonfiction

Empty by Suzanne Weyn (Scholastic, 2010) *Empty* takes place 10 years from now. Our global fossil fuel supply is running out. For teens in small town Sage Valley, New York, life will never be the same. Their ingenuity pulls the community together. With relevant current science info throughout this engaging novel makes this a unique and compelling read. Fiction

Eyes Wide Open: Going Beyond the Environmental Headlines by Paul Fleischman (Candlewick Press, 2014) An information rich account of environmental conditions in the United States with a science lens that integrates the necessary perspectives from politics, psychology, and history. A briefing for the 21st century and applicable to our global situations. Nonfiction

Going Blue: A Teen Guide to Protecting Our Oceans, Lakes, Rivers & Wetlands by Cathryn Berger Kaye and Philippe Cousteau (Free Spirit Publishing, 2010) *Going Blue* presents facts and statistics about Earth's oceans and waterways and information about the issues surrounding our current water crisis. Readers find strategies and examples that help them see themselves as change agents and move forward to complete an effective service plan.

In Our Village: Kambi ya Simba through the Eyes of Its Youth by Students of Awet Secondary School, edited by Barbara Cervone, brings a small remote village in Tanzania into your classroom. This book inspired a service learning program *In Our Global Village* which invites students around the world to write books back to the Awet students. Find out more at www.inourvillage.org. Nonfiction

My Name is Parvana by Deborah Ellis takes up to a military base in post-Taliban Afghanistan. American authorities have just imprisoned a teenaged girl found in a bombed-out school. The army major thinks she may be a terrorist working with the Taliban. The girl does not respond to questions in any language and remains silent, even when she is threatened, harassed and mistreated over several days. This novel tells her story of striving with her mother to establish a school for girls. Fiction, young adult

Potatoes on Rooftops: Farming in the Concrete Jungle by Hadley Dyer provides a global view of how people of all ages and condition are discovering innovative ways to grow fresh, healthy, and delicious fruit and vegetables at home, in community gardens, and at school. Rich with science, geography, math, social studies, and inventive thinking—all pointing to taking action. In a Detroit high school students grow food and raise chickens; in Tokyo, a bank vault becomes an underground greenhouse; in Nairobi, local youth transform part of a slum into a garden that helps feed their families. Read about modern inventions such as futuristic pod greenhouses, food-producing wall panels, and industrial-sized composters. Nonfiction

Sold by Patricia McCormick introduces Lakshmi, aged 13, living an ordinary life in Nepal, going to school and thinking of the boy she is to marry, when her life is abruptly changed when her stepfather sells her into prostitution in India. Refusing to be with men, she is beaten and starved until she gives in. Written in free verse, the first-person narrative exposes the tragedy of Lakshmi's plight relieved only learning to read and ultimate rescue. Based on the author interviews with girls suffering from similar experiences. Fiction, young adult

These Things Happen by Richard Kramer is a novel exploring identity: how do we know who we are? The time is now, and an incident occurs after a high school election that changes everything. When Wesley's best friend comes out in an acceptance speech following his election to the presidency of the tenth grade, the two boys find themselves at the center of an act of violence. Personal values evaporate as all the characters in the book have to reconsider what they believe. By the end, no one is who they were at the start, and all must find the courage to truly, for the first time, face who they are. Fiction, young adult

War Brothers: The Graphic Novel by Sharon D. McKay and Daniel Lafrance introduces us to Jacob, a 14-year-old Ugandan sent away to a boys' school. Once there, he assures his friend Tony they need not be afraid—they will be safe. But not long after, in the shadow of night, the boys are abducted. Marched into the jungle, they are brought to an encampment of the feared rebel soldiers. They are told they must kill or be killed, and their world turns into a terrifying struggle to endure and survive. The poignant artwork and evocative text capture the haunting experiences of a young boy caught in a brutal war. Fiction

As you venture into service learning, know that you are joining many colleagues who have been inspired by the essence of what we all entered into teaching for in the first place: *To make a difference in the lives of children*. Enjoy the process, the books, and the journey.

Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., has written many books and articles on service learning and related topics to improve education. She travels the globe speaking at conferences and providing onsite professional development. Visit her website at www.cbkassociates.com for additional articles (under Resources) blogs and more book recommendations, or email her at cathy@cbkassociates.com.

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